

Although societies' elite institutions and leaders find ways to use symbolic forms and other resources at their disposal, in the final analysis no totalising, controlling, hegemonic effect is possible.

No matter what society structure you look at in the western world there will always be elite institutions, such as the government, educational systems, media, law enforcement bodies – such as the police, at the top of the hierarchy and the heart of that society. Symbolic forms are one of the many resources at these elite institutions disposal. These said symbolic forms could take the seemingly simple form of road traffic signs – to keep drivers safe and ensure they adhere to the laws of the roads. Obviously the large number of road traffic accidents worldwide highlights the fact that sometimes the symbolic forms used by elite institutions are not taken notice of to the extent they were intended to be.

The symbolic forms could be more explicit, for example, when clothes companies develop a logo to place on all their products and related items to become recognised immediately by their consumers and possible new markets. Large multi national companies like Gap, Levis, Nike and United Colours of Benetton would be great examples of clothing companies that have a massive brand campaign behind them that has ensured they are instantly recognisable. Each logo using certain colours, type faces and even sometimes the company name has been replaced with a non-word symbol, such as Nike taking the 'tick' symbol, jazzing it up a little and using it as their logo rather than the company name. 'A picture paints a thousand words' would be a good way to illustrate the way elite institutions, especially clothing companies, use symbolic forms.

Semiology - the study of signs and sign systems, the way in which they are used to communicate and how we understand them is broadly based on the work of two people: Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) and Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980). Saussure was a linguist who was interested in the underlying structure of language and how it was used. He extended his studies from language to literature and even to the structures of different

societies. Barthes was a structuralist. His original interest was in how signs were used in literature and the theatre and how readers and audiences were able to understand them. Barthes devised a system of classifying signs, which revealed the underlying structure of how texts are organised.

Award winning journalist and best-selling author, Naomi Klein wrote extensively about the 'branded world' in her book 'No Logo' published in 2000. This book has been the source of much of my own thinking on such subjects, as her writing is truly thought provoking. Using symbols to communicate to society will ensure a larger proportion of the population is able to interpret the message because it crosses over any illiteracy barriers. It would be fair to say that some types of symbolic forms have more effect than others in society. This is to say that the earlier example of road traffic signs are seen by most people to be important. Due to the majority of the population agreeing that the sign makes sense and they can see the importance of adhering to the command, it would be right to say that for the most part these signs do their job. As earlier mentioned, these signs, elite institution's symbolic forms in disguise, do not have a totalising, controlling, hegemonic effect because not every single person sticks to them.

The term hegemony comes from Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937). It is said that the concept of hegemony (gegemoniya) was first used as part of a slogan of the Russian Social-Democratic movement from 1890 to 1917. When considering the works of a theoretician and leader it is important to have a certain level of understanding about their life to give context to where their ideas on society stemmed from. Gramsci had a difficult childhood, not only because he was a victim of capitalism, economical and social unfairness of the beginning of the 20th century, but also because his family, including Gramsci himself, were in some way injured by bureaucracy. He was punished for his thoughts by the fascist power and condemned to pass almost his entire life in jail. His short existence was dedicated to his beliefs.

Not only was he an important intellectual of Marxist theories, but also a leader, a politician and he fought passionately in the battlefield of ideas and action. Understanding Gramsci's

theory requires looking at some of the basic Marxist arguments and assumptions. Firstly, economic determination- everything in life is determined by capital. The flow of money affects our relations with other persons, with nature and with the world. Secondly, class struggle - the dynamic of a society can only be understood in terms of a system where the dominant ideas are formulated by the ruling class to secure its control over the working class. The latter, exploited by the former, will eventually try to change this situation, by means of revolution, producing its own ideas as well as its own industrial and political organisation. Finally, base/superstructure - Marx's deterministic economic conception divides the society in two layers or levels: base and superstructure. The first, upon which everything grows, is composed by the material production, money, objects, the relations of production and the stage of development of productive forces. The second, determined by the first, is where we can find the political and ideological institutions, our social relations, and set of ideas; our cultures, hopes, dreams and spirit.

The meaning of Gramsci's term hegemony could be summed up thus. The concept assumes an indubitable consent given by the majority of a population to a certain direction suggested by those in power. However, this consent is not always peaceful and may combine physical force or coercion with intellectual, moral and cultural inducement. Hegemony emerges from social and class struggles and serves to shape / influence peoples minds. Hegemony is a set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is of particular salience to media issues due to its focus on culture and ideology. Unlike Marxist theories of domination, Gramsci relegates economic determinants to the background and brings to the fore the role of intellectuals in the process. The fact that television and cinema are central to popular culture is crucial. Gramsci states that particular attention should be given to 'everyday' routine structures and 'common sense' values in trying to locate mechanisms of domination. Institutions such as the mass media, the family, the education system and religion, play a key role in the shaping of people's awareness and consciousness and thus can be agents through which hegemony is constructed, exercised and maintained.

Gramsci's ideas about concentrating attention on 'everyday' routine structures can be seen on our television screens twenty-four hours a day. Take the clothing companies I mentioned earlier as an example. Hundreds of thousands of pounds are spent each year on television advertising to promote various brands. These adverts usually have a re-occurring style or look to them and become symbolic themselves. The clothing company, Gap, use quirky song and dance routines in each of their commercials to promote their brand. At the end of each advert, their logo appears. There is no need for any 'verbal' selling of the brand; it is purely visual. This style of advertising sticks in the mind of the audience and now, when a new commercial is screened, the audience know that it is a Gap advert before the logo is even seen. Therefore the advert formula becomes a symbol itself. Even though these adverts stick in the viewers minds, as freethinking human beings, we do not all become Gap shoppers just on the basis of a great advertising campaign.

This links to the school of thought within media studies to do with media audiences and how they use the media or how the media uses them. I will discuss briefly the effects model and the uses and gratification model.

The effects model – hypodermic model – is the name given to approaches that emphasis what the media do to their audiences. Power lies with the message here. The media in such work are often called 'the mass media' or 'mass communications' so as to emphasis the size and scale of their operations. On the other hand, the Uses and Gratifications model emphasises what the audiences and readerships of media products do with them. Power here is often argued to lie with the individual consumer of media, who is imagined as consciously using particular programmes, films or magazines to gratify certain needs and interests.

Far from being duped by the media, the audience here is seen as made up of individuals free to reject, use or play with media meanings as they choose. The need to be gratified, following Maslow (1970) and McQuail et al. (1972), would include those for diversion and escapism, for information, for comparing relationships and lifestyle of characters with one's own, or for sexual stimulation.

Gramsci's theory can obviously be criticised. I have picked the below mentioned writers to illustrate flaws in the Gramsci theory. Dominic Strinati: From Strinati's point of view the main problem with Gramsci's ideas is the same as with the Frankfurt School's theories, their Marxist background. A class-based analysis is always limiting and tends to simplify the relation between the people and their own culture, which is the problem of confining a social theory within the Marxist limits. The deterministic framework does not allow history to contradict the theory and the interpretation of reality becomes rather elementary.

"People can accept the prevailing order because they are compelled to do so by devoting their time to 'making a living', or because they cannot conceive another way of organising society, and therefore fatalistically accept the world as it is. This, moreover, assumes that the question why people should accept a particular social order is the only legitimate question to ask. It can be claimed that an equally legitimate question is why should people not accept a particular social order?" (Strinati, 1995)

Todd Gitlin: Gitlin's opinion is that Gramsci's ideas, and the later works based upon them, propose a debate that is rather abstract with a concept of cultural hegemony as a "substance with a life of its own" settled over the whole public of capitalist societies to confuse the reality. But, Gitlin wonders if the fact that the same film (or the same advertisement, or the same article, or the same television programme) is subject to a variety of interpretations, may suggest a crisis of hegemonic ideology, a failure in the cultural programmed minds. Moreover, the success of media in modern societies implies a certain sensitivity to audience tastes, desires and tolerances, in order to perpetuate the system. From Gitlin's perspective the relationship between audiences, media products and culture structures is less inflexible, and more collaborative.

"The cultural hegemony system that results is not a closed system. It leaks. Its very structure leaks, at the least because it remains to some extent competitive." (Gitlin in Newcomb, 1994)

In conclusion, within modern day society the educated amongst us, in my view, are aware of media constructed meanings and use of symbolic forms.

Thus there is no totalising, controlling, hegemonic effect in operation in society. That is not to say that all members of society are unaffected by hidden meanings within the media, even individuals that are aware that hidden meanings exist may still succumb to the message. It is more to do with the fact that the false consciousness notion of Marx seems rather old fashioned in present day. The prevalence of university students doing media related studies demonstrates, to a certain degree, the seemingly sudden increase in public interest surrounding the ins and outs of the mass media communication institution. If these students have decided to do media studies for want of decoding any hidden ways the country's government uses the media, they can probably think again due to the fact that the courses themselves are created under government advisories. Marx may have been right that a revolution of the proletariat will end capitalism, that very revolution could start with those disheartened media students!